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[Smart Move: Barack Obama Goes Populist In the Home Stretch](#)

In my [nationally syndicated newspaper column last week](#), I outlined some of the difficult terrain Barack Obama has in trying to both court working-class voters and avoid the media's racist characterization of power-challenging African-American leaders as race-centric radicals. This is a very, very difficult thing to do, and I sympathize with Obama in moving carefully up to this point.

But with the next round of states overrepresenting for the constituencies Obama has done most poorly among - working-class whites and Latinos - he knows he has to try to thread the needle. He has to try to offer up more full-throated, class-based populism. And indeed, that's what he's doing.

In his victory speech last night, [Obama hammered the North American Free Trade Agreement](#), previewing a major economic speech today. [Here are some excerpts](#):

"It's a Washington where decades of trade deals like NAFTA and China have been signed with plenty of protections for corporations and their profits, but none for our environment or our workers who've seen factories shut their doors and millions of jobs disappear; workers whose right to organize and unionize has been under assault for the last eight years...So today, I'm laying out a comprehensive agenda to reclaim our dream and restore our prosperity. It's an agenda that focuses on three broad economic challenges that the next President must address - the current housing crisis; the cost crisis facing the middle-class and those struggling to join it; and the need to create millions of good jobs right here in America- jobs that can't be outsourced and won't disappear.

For our economy, our safety, and our workers, we have to rebuild America. I'm proposing a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank that will invest \$60 billion over ten years. This investment will multiply into almost half a trillion dollars of additional infrastructure spending and generate nearly two million new jobs - many of them in the construction industry that's been hard hit by this housing crisis. The repairs will be determined not by politics, but by what will maximize our safety and homeland security; what will keep our environment clean and our economy strong. And we'll fund this bank by ending this war in Iraq. It's time to stop spending billions of dollars a week trying to put Iraq back together and start spending the money on putting America back together instead...

It's also time to look to the future and figure out how to make trade work for American workers. I won't stand here and tell you that we can - or should - stop free trade. We can't stop every job from going overseas. But I also won't stand here and accept an America where we do nothing to help American workers who have lost jobs and opportunities because of these trade agreements. And that's a position of mine that doesn't change based on who I'm talking to or the election I'm running in.

You know, in the years after her husband signed NAFTA, Senator Clinton would go around talking about how great it was and how many benefits it would bring. Now that she's running for President, she says we need a time-out on trade. No one knows when this time-out will end. Maybe after the election.

I don't know about a time-out, but I do know this - when I am President, I will not sign another trade agreement unless it has protections for our environment and protections for American workers. And I'll pass the [Patriot Employer Act](#) that I've been fighting for ever since I ran for the Senate - we will end the tax breaks for companies who ship our jobs overseas, and we will give those breaks to companies who create good jobs with decent wages right here in America."

This is really terrific stuff, and I say that as someone who has been [critical of Obama](#) in the past for his timidity on issues like trade - issues that make the Establishment particularly uncomfortable.

Politically, the benefits to Obama of voicing a populist message on trade are obvious. Recent polls in the [Wall Street Journal](#) and [Fortune magazine](#) show that Americans are overwhelmingly opposed to America's current lobbyist-written trade policy. While this trade policy may be popular on K Street, it ain't popular on Main Street. And as it relates to Obama's message of reconfiguring the political map and attracting Republican voters, a populist line on trade is perhaps the single most powerful tool to do just that. A [post-2006 election poll for the Democracy Corps and Campaign for America's Future](#) showed that among Republican voters who considered voting Democratic that year, the GOP's support for unfair trade deals was the top reason they considered switching. While Clinton insultingly says many "red states" Obama won are [unimportant](#) because they supposedly can't be won by a Democrat on election day, these numbers suggest a populist message on trade against a "free" trader like John McCain (R) could profoundly change the map.

Substantively, Obama certainly hasn't been as aggressive as many would like on trade, and my reservations about him on this issue will persist. However, this is undoubtedly an encouraging step and it's fair to say he understands the real-world impact of this issue. This is a person who represents Illinois and who talks about working in the shadows of shuttered steel mills. With the departure of John

Edwards, Obama is a candidate whose top economic adviser, Austan Goolsbee, is the only remaining top presidential economic guru who [acknowledges](#) that our current trade deals are horrifying - rather than wonderful. And though we've seen people like Bill Clinton promise as candidates to get tough on trade and then as president [do exactly the opposite](#), this is a different candidate and a different era - with a much more angry public.

True, Obama's a bit late to this - but as someone concerned more with movement building than with an individual candidate, I say better late than never. And, after all, the primary process is a time that can truly shape candidates in a genuine way. As just one example, Howard Dean was the moderate, near-DLC governor of Vermont, and had a very authentic and profound conversion into a more proud progressive populist during his 2004 presidential run. We should embrace that kind of transformation - and hold out the possibility that perhaps a similar dynamic is playing out with Obama on an issue like trade.

Sure, there's some opportunism here as well. Obama is likely trying to walk down the path John Edwards first courageously blazed in this race. He is looking out at the next cluster of primary states and knows that these are the ones that have been hit hard by NAFTA and other rigged trade deals. He looks at Ohio and sees Sen. Sherrod Brown (D) - a man who was elected in 2006 based largely on his opposition to our current trade policy. He also sees the [New York Times report](#) that former President Bill Clinton is going to be campaigning in Ohio - and knows that the best way to make that boomerang against his opponent is to remind Ohio voters that it was Bill and Hillary Clinton who jammed NAFTA down the Buckeye State's throat.

But opportunism isn't bad. If Obama sees his opportunity in voicing a progressive, populist message on trade, then that's a good thing. That means that we have a leading presidential candidate who sees being a populist and a progressive as a major opportunity. For the progressive movement, that's what success looks like.

Obama is sure to be berated by national pundits for going populist - it's precisely the kind of message that drives well-heeled Establishment propagandists across the partisan spectrum crazy. From Joe Klein to David Broder to David Brooks, questioning the economic elite is seen as the ultimate blasphemy. As [Sherrod Brown told the Nation this week](#), when he ran in 2006, "I got one newspaper endorsement in the state of the big nine papers." Most opposed him because he dared to challenge the economic orthodoxy that says we must have trade deals that encourage corporations to eliminate jobs, destroy the environment and exploit workers, while legislating protectionism for patents, intellectual property, copyrights and other corporate profit shields.

But Brown didn't cater to elite opinion - he was talking directly to voters. If Obama can withstand the inevitable onslaught of scorn from the Punditburo, his new populism may deliver him the presidency.

Posted by David Sirota